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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of in-basket items, typical of what school administrators would face on the job, and small-group activities to encourage the novice (graduate students in school administration) to exhibit behaviors that result from reflective thought. The process involves classroom exercises that simulate situations typical of school administration. Through instructor feedback and group discussion, students are encouraged to incorporate behaviors characteristic of effective administrators. Sample in-basket items are included. (LMI)

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THE USE OF IN-BASKETS AND SMALL GROUP PROCESSES FOR INSTRUCTION ON CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

Solving problems is the essence of the art of school administration. The school principalship is characterized by a variety of "publics" who demand not only attention but satisfaction of needs. It is the effective principal who can integrate experience with theory and research to formulate and implement solutions to problems of practice.

Schon (1983) called his theory "reflection-in-action" which distinguished the novice from the expert. The ability of the expert to draw upon knowledge gained from past experience to recognize dilemmas, respond to the dilemmas by identifying both their unique characteristics and similarities to other situations, and to consider alternatives and the consequences of each influences the quality of the decisions made and the effectiveness of the administrator on the whole.

This paper discusses the use of in-basket items, typical of what school administrators would face on the job, and small group activities to encourage the novice (graduate students in school administration) to exhibit behaviors that result from reflective thought. Though not yet appointed to administrative positions and certainly lacking years of experience, these individuals have, as teachers, dealt with a variety of "publics" and have relatively informed perspectives of the principalship and its job responsibilities. Classroom activities employed simulate situations typical of school administration. Through instructor feedback and group discussion, students are encouraged to incorporate behaviors characteristic of effective administrators.

THE USE OF IN-BASKETS AND SMALL GROUP PROCESSES FOR INSTRUCTION ON CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATION

Introduction

The literature on educational administration suggests a number of skill areas characteristic of effective administration within schools. Professors of educational administration attempt to provide instruction in these areas for their graduate students that will enable them, upon later appointment, to become effective school administrators.

By examining these skill areas and encouraging reflective thought regarding their effective application in unique situations, students in principalship classes gain valuable "experience" prior to facing these dilemmas while on the job or "when it really counts." By placing these students in difficult simulated situations and requiring them to analyze the consequences of the behaviors they exhibit and choices they make, insight into the "essence" of school administration (problem solving) can be gained.

This paper recounts a process employed in graduate principalship classes where students engage in activities where they play roles. Following the exercises, the students critically analyze their behaviors as measured across a variety of skill areas . The result is a more realistic perspective, gained through simulated activities and subsequent reflective thought, of effective school administration.

Rationale

Upon graduation from the university, the Master of Education degree-holders in educational administration are deemed qualified

(to whatever degree) to "run a school." Coursework completed and subsequent credentials issued "certify" the capability of these classroom teachers (in most cases) to not only manage a school but to provide the appropriate leadership necessary to move the organization in a positive direction.

In most cases, these potential principalship candidates have little, if any, administrative experience. School administration and school teaching have two entirely different job descriptions. A good classroom teacher does not automatically make a good school administrator (or vice versa). Teaching school does not allow one to regularly come into contact with the types of activities one routinely finds in school administration, even though both center on the education of young people.

Teachers do, however, routinely solve educational problems and have some sense of the demands of school administration through contact with and observation of their administrators. Additionally, students enrolled in educational administration programs are in the process of accumulating a mental library of administrative theory, research, and knowledge about practice.

At the university, classroom lecture from a textbook, no matter how thoroughly supplemented with additional material, can only go so far in providing the students a realistic picture of what the job of school principal will entail. Additionally, it is rare that a classroom teacher/graduate student (apart from some well-designed practicum experiences) gets the chance to participate in true-to-life administrative experiences. In-class simulations and prompt feedback across those areas that have been

identified as being indigenous to administrative positions has potential effectiveness in two arenas.

First, it provides preservice candidates with information on skills necessary for effective administration of schools. Beyond mere information (which is important), the student is provided with opportunities to explore and practice said skills prior to ever having to demonstrate them "when it counts." Upon leaving the course the students will feel more comfortable in these types of situations should they be encountered following appointment to an administrative position. Part of the professor of educational administration's responsibility is to prepare the students for successful completion of related challenges they may face. One of the first challenges will be that of convincing someone of their potential for success in an administrative role. By being able to discuss, even from a "simulated" perspective, administrative problems and approaches to solving them, these students will have a better chance of convincing a future employer of their informed awareness in these areas.

Secondly, once they have been appointed, their chances for success and effective leadership will be enhanced. They have had the opportunity to hone skills (prior to appointment) not usually encountered until after appointment to an administrative position. "Thinking on their feet," "feeling their way," and mistake-prone "trial and error" approaches to novice attempts at administration will be greatly diminished. Chances for early success on the job will be increased.

Several skill areas/characteristics have been identified and are examined and assessed at a pre-service competency level.

These skills are tagged as "requisite" for beginning administrators to insure their chances for success in the role of school principal:

1. Leadership
2. Delegation
3. Judgment
3. Decisiveness
4. Problem Analysis
5. Consequence Analysis
6. Interpersonal Relations
7. Stress Tolerance
8. Organizational Ability
9. Communication
10. Ethics/Values

Process

Graduate students in educational administration participate in two exercises. These activities provide data that can be examined by the instructor and assessed across most of the skill areas or characteristics identified above. Feedback is presented to the students in oral and written form indicating strengths and weakness in the skill areas or characteristics considered.

Students go into the activities "blind"; that is, they are not told ahead of time what the activities will be nor are they informed of the areas of focus. No preliminary information is presented to the students concerning the activity, its content, or its purpose. There are two reasons for this approach.

First, if the students were informed ahead of time of what areas were being assessed, how to "shine" in these areas, and what the activity would be, then they would have time to reflect on these skills and influence the "pretest" approach. Cuing would take place and could possibly influence their more natural responses, which are, in essence, what the process is examining.

Secondly, following the exercise, much discussion will take place concerning their "performance," the intent of the activity, and what each skill is and why each is important. Reflection is encouraged at this point to determine the consequences of their behaviors and to consider alternative approaches for the future. A second chance, following instruction (a posttest), will be provided in the form of a similar exercise on the mid-term or final examination. Anticipatory sets, inductive learning, reinforcement, and other benefits are derived from this approach.

Activities

The first activity in which the students engage is a group of "in-basket" items. The instruction sheet and a few example items follow:

IN-BASKET EXERCISE

> In the following exercise you will be required to read a number of letters and memos. These are to be handled by you only through written communication. You may write letters, memos, notes to yourself, make markings on your calendar, request more information from your data processing department at central office, etc. Each individual piece of communication that you make should be just as if you were actually in the job. Don't tell me what you would do -- do it in writing.

Background

You have been working full time on your doctorate in educational administration at a local university and have received a call from the superintendent of a neighboring school district to which you have applied for an administrative position. It seems the principal (Mr. Reitz) at one of their high schools (Keaster High School) had to be dismissed rather abruptly two weeks into the fall semester and you have been asked to replace him. Someone from the outside who is unfamiliar with the school and its community is preferred in this case to circumvent any loyalties and allegiances that might exist with candidates from within the district. You have decided to accept the position.

The assistant principal (Mr. Richards) has been an administrator at the school for 15 years but has no aspirations of becoming the principal. He (a native) is totally familiar with all aspects of the school and community and, you are told by the superintendent (Mr. David) that Mr. Richards, is aware of the reasons for your hiring and will be extremely helpful. Your secretary (Miss Kenzie) will report to work at 8:00. She also has been informed of the change. In fact, the entire community has been publicly informed of your hiring through the media.

You arrive at your new office on Tuesday morning, September 17, 1991, at 7:00 (one week after Mr. Reitz's dismissal). This stack of items is on your desk. You will have one hour to complete this assignment before you have to leave for a meeting at the central office for all administrators. Take as much action as you can in the time you have, but avoid making assumptions.

Additionally, for the sake of the exercise you must complete the "Explanation Form." Record (briefly) what you did for each item and explain why. If you did not handle an item, simply put "Did not handle" and explain why.

Remember, write down everything that you decide to do or plan to do. Clip your written responses to each item handled and turn them in. You will have one hour to finish.

#1

Sept. 9, 1991

District Correspondence

To: (You)

From: Mrs. Magnus, Asst. Supt. for Policies/Procedures

Mr./Mrs. _____,

We will be having a meeting of the principals in the district on Sept. 24, 1991 at 9:00 in my office to discuss the results of the recent parent survey on the district-wide adoption of school uniforms for students. As you are probably aware, this is a highly volatile issue and the lines are sharply divided.

If you will, please put down on paper your feelings on the issue (from the standpoint of a new administrator) and send them to me prior to the meeting. That way I will be able to assess the feelings of the group (all are being asked to do the same) prior to our discussion.

Your opinions (as an outsider) are important to the group. Please let me know if there is a conflict.

#2

9-12-91

School Memo

To: (you)

From: Betty Mayfield, Chairperson
Student Welfare Committee

Mr./Mrs._____,

Will you please do something about Mrs. Rogers? She was appointed to our committee by Mr. Reitz and has done nothing but cause trouble and conflict. All she does is sit during meetings and find fault with everything we are trying to do. Honestly, it seems as if she has no concern for the welfare of our students at all!

Please talk with her or (better) just take her off the committee!

#3

September 9, 1991

Dear Mr/Mrs _____,

Welcome to your new position as principal at Keaster High School. I am glad to hear someone from outside the district had been appointed and I am sure you will be extremely fair and objective in the decisions you render.

I am writing to you to see if anything can be done for my daughter, Julie, who is a bright, intelligent, and athletic sophomore in your school. Here is the problem: Last year when we moved into the district Mr. Reitz promised us that the school would have a girls' soccer team this

year. That has not happened. Julie has competed on a number of teams (playground, All-Star, and AAU) and has done extremely well even in competition with boys. She has been contacted by two colleges about scholarships (academic/athletic) but may not have the chance to pursue them if she cannot play her sport.

I have contacted my lawyer and am prepared to take what actions are necessary to protect my daughter's (and mine) interests. As you know college can be extremely expensive! We are contemplating having her try out for the boys' team when practice starts on Wednesday (the 16th) but Coach Boyles has adamantly said "NO" to female participation. He says he doesn't coach girls.

Please be advised that I am a persistent person and am fighting for more than just equality here.

Sincerely,

Jeff Bridges

#4

9-13-91

District Correspondence

To: (You)

From: Mr. David, Superintendent

Welcome to your new position and thank you for accepting our offer. We think you will be a valuable asset to our district and are sure that your presence at Keaster High School will impact the program there.

I am taking this time to make a request of you. I know that you are very busy in your first few days in "office," but we are in the process of evaluating the district early on in the school year and would value your input. Being from the "outside" you can offer rare insight to our situation here. After you have been here a few weeks, make an appointment with me and we can talk over your observations.

Again, welcome, good luck, and have a good year!

#5

9-10-91

School Memo

To: (You)

From: Daisy Rifle, Librarian

Mr/Mrs _____:

Please do something! I don't know whose idea it was to move Mr. Lincoln's speech/drama class next door to the library, but I personally think it was a dumb move. Everybody knows that his classes are extra noisy due to whatever he does with those kids. They laugh, they yell, they do group chants (or whatever they are) -- it is not the type of atmosphere you want going on next to the library.

I think Mr. Lincoln was able to convince Mr. Reitz (they are fishing buddies) to let him have that room because it is large and there is a stage up in front. So what, I say! Doesn't anybody ever consider strategic planning around here?

Help! I'm desperate!

Again, this is just a sample of the fifteen items the students are given. Others might be handwritten and deal with problems concerning student Bible clubs, a complaint from a female student about a "fresh" coach, rumblings of racial unrest and potential "gang" violence, and others typical of school problems. A form is provided for them to record their actions and why they responded in that manner. This information will provide much material for instruction and reflection in later discussions.

Following the exercise, a key for skill areas or characteristics is provided to the students (and included below) so that they will know what areas are examined in this exercise and what particular aspects of each might be encouraged.

Next, so that the feedback to them will be easily understood, their efforts are color coded for easy referencing back to the key sheet.

KEY FOR SKILL AREAS

IN-BASKET EXERCISE

Did the student. . .

DG - DELEGATION
1) . . . "dissect" the problem
2) . . . communicate assignments to others
3) . . . require feedback

J - JUDGMENT
1) . . . prioritize items
2) . . . consider all aspects of the problem
3) . . . inform appropriate personnel

DC - DECISIVENESS
1) . . . address most of the items
2) . . . act promptly

PA - PROBLEM ANALYSIS
1) . . . accurately "define" the problem
2) . . . attempt to get more information
3) . . . complete the task

CA - CONSEQUENCE ANALYSIS
1) . . . consider negative consequences
2) . . . plan for reducing impact of consequences

IR - INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS
1) . . . consider other viewpoints
2) . . . deal tactfully with others
3) . . . use sensitive wording

OA - ORGANIZATIONAL ABILITY
1) . . . have a plan
2) . . . use available resources

C - COMMUNICATION
1) . . . express self clearly in writing
2) . . . use correct grammar, syntax, spelling, etc.

EV - ETHICS/VALUES
1) . . . demonstrate a concern for students
2) . . . show an appreciation for education
3) . . . do the right thing

The students' responses to the in-basket items are returned to them with color-coded highlights (indicating the emerging skill area) and comments from the instructor. Each item is addressed in group discussion for things of the following nature:

1. Is this important (something I even need to address)?
2. Do I need more information before I act?
3. What are my resources for more information and how do I go about getting it?
4. Is this item extremely important and one that deserves immediate attention?
5. What would the experienced, effective administrator do?

Other considerations are addressed, but these will suggest the analysis that takes place and the emphasis on appropriate actions. Interestingly, some students express surprise that administrators have to deal with these types of complex problems and that there is such a variety of demands placed upon people in these positions.

The second exercise is a leaderless group activity. The two exercises are conducted within one class period and no information or discussion takes place prior to or in between the two activities. The School Grant exercise is included below complete with an instruction sheet and the students' assigned roles for the group effort. A "key sheet" is also provided for this activity, but "organizational ability" and "decisiveness" have been deleted and "leadership," has been added. The exercise is videotaped and transcripts are made of what is said when the group enters its discussion.

SCHOOL GRANT
(Assigned Roles)

Your district (piloting an exercise in site-based management and localized budgeting) has given a sum of money to your school to use as deemed appropriate. Conditions of the "grant" are as follows:

1. The entire sum ($1,000) is to be spent in one department.

2. The money will be granted only if there is consensus concerning designation.

3. The money will be spent to enhance student instruction.

4. A general outline of how the money will be spent is expected.

Your task as a group of department heads will be to decide which department will receive the money and propose a general outline suggesting how the money will be expended. Fair consideration should be given to each department represented as each has a legitimate need.

Individually, your task is to attempt to persuade the others that your need is the greatest and that the money will be best spent in your department. At the same time, keep in mind that consensus must be achieved or the money will be given to another school. You will have 15 minutes to look over the materials and prepare for the meeting to follow. Feel free to make notes or mark on the information sheets. You have been assigned to represent your department. The group will have 45 minutes to complete the task.

"A"
Physical Education Department

The P.E. department has been "taken care of" in the past as the principal is the ex-athletic director and ex-department head. Equipment has always been in good supply and the teachers are able to provide a very diversified program for both boys and girls. Damaged or broken equipment has been readily replaced and the boys' locker room has recently (last year) been renovated.

However, the girls' locker room is in sad need of equal attention. The lockers themselves need repairs for security of personal belongings during classes, the showers leak and need new plumbing, and space for storage of equipment and changing clothes is short supply.

Money has been raised and set aside to do most of the work, but the department is still about $900 - $1000 short.

"B

Music Department

The music department is recognized statewide for its exemplary band and chorus programs. The music boosters organization is very active and provides funds for the department through two major fund-raising drives, one each semester. Everyone (music students, parents, and faculty) works extremely hard to raise the necessary moneys for the various contests and performances to which the band and chorus travel. Most of the program's needs are met by the fund-raising efforts.

However, the $1,000 grant would buy new risers for the chorus and the old ones are awkward, heavy, difficult to assemble, and their safety is questionable. The parents (boosters) have become increasingly resentful that they have to raise "all the money" for the program. There have been threats of a "boycott" of sorts if the school doesn't demonstrate some commitment to the program. Much good publicity for the school and the district has been received through its success.

"C"

Math Department

Within the last three years the math department has undergone some major changes. For a number of years the department was considered a relatively weak program. Low achievement test scores were the result of weak leadership and low departmental expectations. Recently, you (the new department head) have been able to rejuvenate the faculty, give them a sense of pride through respect for math competency, and have been able to raise test scores of students each of the last three years. A monetary commitment has been demonstrated by the administration to the department, and (through these funds) several improvements have contributed to recent successes. A new math curriculum was adopted, training for a peer coaching program was financed, and stipends for supplemental faculty tutoring were funded. Additionally, a local accounting firm has promised to donate a computer for each math classroom.

However, one condition of the donation specifies that the school must pay for the wiring and set-up costs. The figure comes to approximately $1,000. Obviously, this is chance that should not be passed by, but the administration

feels enough emphasis has been shifted toward the math department from the general fund in recent years.

"D"

Science Department

The "Young Scientist Club" has recently been featured in a national science publication focusing on student accomplishments. The school is blessed with 10 national merit scholarship finalists. ACT scores are "off the board" and the school's two Science Quiz Bowl teams (comprised essentially of these 10 students) were pitted against one another in the finals. This is the only time a school has ever had two teams qualify, let alone compete in the finals. The national competition for the state champions is one month away and a good showing could mean quality scholarship offers for the students who participate.

However, the district has cut out all funds for travel for field trips and competitions. If the science students are to go to the national competition, they have to raise the money themselves. The $1,000 grant will give each of the five team members a good start on the approximately $500 each will need.

"E"

Foreign Language

The foreign language department is on the move. From a total of two teachers, offering first and second year courses in only French and Spanish, the faculty has grown to five and now additionally offers German, Latin, and Russian. Interest in the program has obviously grown among the student body and a very active Foreign Language Club has been formed. A "summer semester" in a foreign country is being planned and the benefits from the cultural exposure are obvious.

However, a more pressing problem confronts the foreign language program. The listening lab, which all students use (or try to use) weekly, is outdated and in need of serious repairs. A number of headphones don't work consistently, and the tape playing units themselves require continued replacement of expensive batteries. Money down the drain is only one reason for some needed changes. Even if all the units and headphones worked, the students would still have to take turns due to the limited number available. A new audio system for the lab is estimated at approximately $1,000.

The exercise provides for lively discussions during and following the activity. Points are made by all students on behalf of their respective departments and sometimes the discussion becomes rather animated. The students really "get into" their roles. In the end, however, they must realize that as a group they have to arrive at consensus and do so within the designated time period.

Feedback for this exercise comes in two forms. First, there is the watching of the video. This allows the students to objectively view themselves and their behaviors without having to be focusing on the task at hand (the grant). The video is stopped for discussion whenever a student or the instructor wishes to question or make a point about what took place. Reflection is again encouraged concerning behaviors and relationships affected by the task. "Could I have done more to help the group complete its task," or "Should I have done less?" "Were my behaviors in keeping with what an effective group participant would do?"

Next, a review of the skill areas of focus is made. Again, explanation is offered of what "desirable behavior" would include and how that behavior relates to effective school administration. Each student receives a copy of the transcript of the video complete with color-coded highlights of their words that demonstrate (or fail to demonstrate) individual skill areas. Time is allowed for the students to look over the transcript before discussion begins. From the master copy (highlights) the instructor points out good examples of each of the skill areas addressed by this exercise.

As suggested earlier, students are given a chance, following instruction and discussion, to demonstrate their improvement in these skill areas. At least one question on the midterm or final examination will require the students to use what they learned to demonstrate attention to at least some of the skill areas covered within the unit.

Evaluation

Because the spring semester will allow only the second attempt at this approach in the principalship class, most of what could be labeled "evaluation" is qualitative or impressionistic in nature and comes from opinions of those familiar with the approach. None of the students have, to this point, been appointed to administrative positions. The only real evaluation gathered at this time are the comments offered by the students in the class following the experience, impressions offered by school principals, and what colleagues have said about it. A sample of these comments follows:

> "The instructor makes the information given in the course applicable to real life situations."
>
> "The exercises and information given on the important skills administrators should have was invaluable. I am sure it will help me in the future."
>
> "I wish all my courses were geared toward things that are necessary for success. I really enjoyed and appreciate the effort."
>
> "The exercise made me realize the importance of thinking before acting. I also got a glimpse of what a principal goes through."
>
> "I wish I had had that opportunity before I became a principal."
>
> "What you've done here is made learning fun, interesting and very practical in nature. Good idea."

Other comments have been made by those informed of the process, but all comments fall along the same lines as those recorded here. Another aspect of the evaluation of the process is that of the impressions of the instructor. In the perception of the instructor, the students are at least better informed of what the principalship entails, and, at best, much better prepared for administrative positions in their future following the exercise. Performance on the examinations suggest that students are at least attentive to a variety of skill areas of which they may not have even been aware prior to the exercise.

If the goal of educational administration programs at the university is to prepare students for the real world, this practical and reflective approach to instruction will provide them with experiences as close to reality as they are going to get at this stage. The analysis and discussion teaches them to be reflective in their approach to dealing with others and solving problems, the "heart and soul" of school administration.

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